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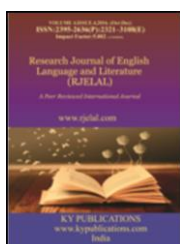
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Gender Consciousness in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT

Be it colonial or post-colonial era women have always been exploited by the society at large. The postcolonial female writers like Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Deshpande Anita Desai and Kiran Desai have tried to explore the feminine perspective in their novels. Kiran Desai's Booker awarded novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) purposes the question of female identity in the pre and post independent India with the conclusion that be it colonized or independent India the females are facing subjugation like sexual harassment, limited to house hold chores and reproduction of babies. Though in the postcolonial India education is changing and bringing forward the females but still the ratio is very less. Desai has presented strong female characters like Sai, Nimi, Lola and Noni who struggle for their identity and try to repress the male domination. According to Desai these gender differences could be altered with the passage of time, but only if the women are conscious for their needs and rights. The women are lacking in self-awareness thus leading to their subjugation and oppression.

Indian female novelists have given a new dimension of frankness to Indian English Novels. They have presented the plight of women in their writings. Kiran Desai is one of those soaring stars in the firmament of Indian English Novels. She has presented the pathetic position of women in the pre-independent India and the same even after independence. Her Booker awarded novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores at length the condition of female in the pre and post-independent India. It reveals how all the way through century's women have held the position of inequity and domination.

The very opening of the book narrates the sexual danger to Sai from the Gorkha burglars in her house. The Gorkha protesters demanded artillery from Sai's grandfather, the retired judge or they were geared up to "kill the dog first and you [judge] second, cook third, ladies last" (5), they said smiling wickedly to Sai. "They looked at one another, at her,

looked up, down and winked." (5) Sai feeling "intensely, fearfully female" (5) brings the guns. This plan of robbery was of Gyan, Sai's Gorkha boyfriend who in order to suppress the girl, or the imperial system of which he thought Sai was symbolic of hatches this plan without thinking that it could harm the young woman. The comparable threat is also faced by non-Indian Lola who is an aged widow of an army officer. Lola approaches the Gorkha Pradhan for help as her land Mon Ami is being encroached by the Gorkhas. But instead of helping Lola the Pradhan and his followers mocked at her. Making her amusing the community Pradhan says;

I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens... I have four, but would you...dear Aunty, would you like to be the fifth? ...And you know, you won't be bearing me any sons at your age so I will expect a big dowry. And you're not much to look at, nothing up—he patted the front of his Khaki shirt—"nothing down"—he

patted his behind, which he twisted out of the chair—"in fact, I have more of both!" (244)

Here, it can be seen that just a sense of gender difference can make a sex privileged and another (the female) marginalized. Age, caste, religion, position do not seek security, even in post-independent India a women is liable for all sorts of subjugation, only because she is a female.

Jemubhai- the so called educated in Britain and professionally just judge of colonial India-acts like a coldblooded dictator with his wife Nimi, only because she is old fashioned and do not put on artificial manners like her husband Jemu or speak in a borrowed language English. Once, in his adolescence, while having lunch, he soiled a white table cloth of grapevine design only because did not like the eating habits of his wife. She chewed "in a way that disgusted" him. In fury Jemubhai's patriarchal supremacy gave him permission to throw a goblet of port on his wife's face. She is unable to do anything than to bear in silence.

In a further instance when Nimi squats on the bathroom seat of the Western fashion and blots it with her mud-covered footprints, Jemubhai could not control his wrath for an understandable mistake and he "took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl" (8). In response to his callousness, Nimi grew dull day by day; she fell asleep "in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night." (8). She became completely incapable to focus on the activities she once loved like dressing and combing her hairs. But Jemubhai do not feel either culpable or sympathetic for her rather, he instructs the servants not to let Nimi come near him as he feels he would be infected with the same disease not realizing that this is because of his harsh behavior towards his wife. He becomes extra hygiene conscious, he powdered himself carefully and ordered the servants to wipe everything with Dettol, so that he may not be infected with the disease his wife was bearing because of him. Nimi was suffering from psychological disorder and not the contagion ailment of which Jemu hyped off.

Once Jemu got so angry on Nimi that he "emptied his glass on her head, sent a ;

Jug of water swinging into the face he no longer found beautiful, filled her ears with leaping soda water. Then, when this wasn't enough to assuage his rage, he hammered down with his fists, raising his arms to bring them down on her again and again, rhythmically, until his own hands were exhausted..." (304)

The representation of Jemubhai is the archetypal iconic picture of the patriarchal male world who thinks women as the object of physical gratification, biological reproduction and transmitters of culture but not as individuals who can enjoy the equal freedom and status in the society. People like Jemubhai who are educated, sitting on high positions and giving lectures on women freedom should come forward and work for their development but its pathetic that the educated class also think females as object for repression and sexual harassment. This is what Desai has tried to reveal in the novel that be it high or low class, educated or uneducated, dignified or undignified a female has to face this subjugation. The freedom from colonizers didn't gave any relief to the females. Still they are being raped, still they are confined to homes and still they are object of amusement. Desai places a question that what has globalization and multiculturalism done for the fairer sex.

Akin to Jemubhai, Bomanbhai Patel too fit in male dominated colonial India and believes in women suppression. Bomanbhai Patel is a "Military Purveyor, Financier, Merchant" (90) having a lot of prosperity and social status. He does not value the womankind; rather he earns profit by trafficking in them.

He offered soldiers unauthorized women in an unauthorized part of town on whom they might spend their aggrandizement of manhood; returned them to their barracks strewn about with black hairs, and smelling like rabbits from a rabbit hutch. (89)

Conversely, when it come up to to the women on his family Bomanbhai is extremely old-fashioned; "the wife and daughters however were kept carefully locked up behind the high walls of the haveli." (90) Bomanbhai's patriarchal frame of mind imposed the harshness of purdah system on the ladies of his

family. The cloak works as the pictogram of subjugation that has so often increased the honor of mankind. The enforcement of purdah or feminine suppression increased Bomanbhai's reverence and respect in the society.

Males like Jemubhai and Bomanbhai consider that the feminine section of the society is naturally ignorant and savage. The women do not have a sense of honor and self respect and maybe treated in anyway the patriarchal society likes. This belief, which is an offshoot of the patriarchal culture, reflects a sense of gender difference in the society.

It is not only the men of the older generations in colonial India (like Jemubhai and Bomanbhai) that are oppressive to women, but in the Postcolonial era too we find the patriarchal domination. Sai's boyfriend Gyan is educated and holds moderate views but he too tries to suppress Sai's individuality by asserting his own thinking on her. On her Western manners and education, he says: "You are like slaves, that's what you are running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere." (163) On Sai's denial to this charge, Gyan repeatedly calls her a "FOOL" (163) and beats her up with a stick. Sai, brought up on the notions of gender equality, cannot bear such an offensive treatment to herself and as a result she tries to protest Gyan by "Lunging at him with hands and nails". (261)

After a brief analysis of the treatment of women in the colonial and post-colonial periods, we find that since the colonial times the women were aware of the oppression meted to them but did not had the courage to revolt the so called leaders of the society and were thus the mute sufferers of the patriarchal tyranny. Thus, Nimi suffers the cruel behaviour of her husband and does not protest because she has been brought up to believe that raising her voice against the patriarch is an offence. The independence movement in 1947 gave the reins of power to the fairer sex where they revolted the colonial gender hierarchy within the social structure. They now got conscious for their equal rights and self esteem and protested their male counterparts for the unjust and inhuman treatment. Nimi is an incarnation of Goddess Shakti who bears the tyrannical violence of her brute husband and do not

protest against him because she was a part of that society where raising a voice to the patriarch was an offence. On the other hand we find the teenager Sai who is full of liberty and equality and desires to share mutual relationship with Gyan.

Kiran Desai has made a clear distinction between the male and female characters in the novel. The males are privileged because of the social norms while the females are discriminated only on gender biasness. To quote Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes a women...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine. (Rai, Sunita, 56)

The novel explores in a very poignant manner that how even after achieving freedom, being educated and living in a globalize culture this fairer section of the society is facing discrimination because of gender differences. According to Desai these gender differences could be altered with the passage of time, but only if the women are conscious for their needs and rights. The women are lacking in self-awareness thus leading to their subjugation and oppression.

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